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ABSTRACT

This study examined acknowledgment pages from 441 dissertations in a prominent school of social work to identify transformations in personal, professional, and sociopolitical aspects of professional doctoral education. Explored reflections on the transition from student to scholar, the structure and nature of mentoring roles, and the influence of shifts in substantive emphases since the program's inception in 1950. Findings support knowledge about the complex processes of career transitions and professional knowledge development. (Contains 63 references.) (EV)

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Acknowledged Development:
Transition to Academic Social Work

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Abstract

This study examines acknowledgement pages from 441 dissertations in a prominent school of social work to identify transformations in personal, professional, and sociopolitical aspects of professional doctoral education. We explore reflections on the transition from student to scholar, the structure and nature of mentoring roles, and the influence of shifts in substantive emphases since the program's inception in 1950. Findings advance knowledge about the complex processes of career transitions and professional knowledge development.

Key words: professional development, mentoring, doctoral education.

K. Staller

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Acknowledged Development:
Transition to Academic Social Work

Introduction

In keeping with the conference theme, *Making a Difference: Research For and About Transformation*[1], this work is about transformation, is in a state of transformation, and shadows my own personal transformation from doctoral student at the Columbia University School of Social Work to faculty member at the University of Alabama School of Social Work. The work has grown from my doctoral days and is still in progress. Today, I would like to summarize the study's background, its current status, and identify two preliminary findings that speak most directly to the theme of "transformation."

Background

This project has its roots in an invitation I received to speak at Columbia University School of Social Work's (CUSSW) Centennial celebration in 1998. CUSSW (originally the New York School of Applied Philanthropy) lays claim to be the oldest social work school in the country. In general, I advise staying clear of the debate between Columbia and the University of Chicago as to which school may rightfully claim primacy; the point is significant to the extent that the history of CUSSW corresponds with the history of in the social work profession itself. Initially CUSSW provided advanced training or masters level education but graduated first doctorate, Alfred Kahn, in 1952. In doing so it joined the cluster of early doctoral programs.

At the time I received my invitation to speak at the Centennial not only was I a doctoral student at CUSSW but I was struggling mightily with my dissertation, an historical case study on the social construction of "running away" during the 1960s-1970s. In keeping with Carolyn Ellis' keynote address on autoethnographic perspective, I admit-- at the autobiographical level-- I was

feeling a bit alienated from the doctoral program. Dissertation writing can be a lonely business. Furthermore, of my favorite mentors, one was struggling with the tenure process at Columbia for reasons beyond my comprehension, and another had left the university altogether. In hindsight my feelings may well have reflected a normal developmental stage and probably resulted in stronger scholastic character. In the moment, however, the speaking invitation seemingly provoked the perplexing responsibility of saying something appropriately sentimental at a 100-year birthday party while feeling estranged from the honoree.

In search of inspiration I wandered into the bowels of the Social Work library and found myself face-to-face with the ultimate token of doctoral achievement—the shelved and bound dissertations. I randomly pulled volumes off the shelves skimming theory, methods, and findings sections without much interest until I began reading the opening words of thanks most frequently labeled "Acknowledgments."

I was attracted to these pages for three reasons. First, I discovered the familiar names of my teachers and mentors repeated recorded—some for 50 years–in these passages. Second, there were words of gratitude written by people I now recognized as leading figures in the field to "classmates" who were themselves important scholars at prestigious universities. Finally, these pages reflected tidbits about the personal and private side of the doctoral process. From those pages I learned of births, deaths, disruptions and events that helped or hindered the process and read of debts, tributes, promises and reflections. It was here that the formality of "science" gave way, briefly, to the person behind the product. In hindsight I suppose I found them appealing both because they mirrored the task I faced in speaking at the Centennial but also because they situated me in an historical and experiential context. They gave context and voice to my own experience.

I used these Acknowledgement pages to inform my presentation at the Centennial. It seemed frivolous and fun. I was unprepared for the serious responses I received from the audience and other panelists. In the midst of the

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[1] This paper was presented at the annual QUIG conference on Qualitative Research in Education,

positive encouragement and helpful suggestions, I began to consider embarking on more systematic study.

Transforming Presentation to Research Study

Joining forces with Dr. Denise Burnette of Columbia University and Dr. Stuart Kirk, of UCLA we began to consider the doctoral Acknowledgement pages as unique literary genre worthy of analysis. Our process started by considering the quality and characteristics of the data and the questioned that might be legitimately asked and soundly answered from it. Like any secondary data we remain mindful both of the strengths and limitations of the data. For example, the 441 CUSSW doctoral acknowledgment pages spanned the entire 50-year history of the program; they included several important examples of students who stayed on as faculty; is primary and reflective data captured at a transitional moment accompanying changes in status, title and social prestige. Data limitations include those commonly associated with secondary data such as those, which are raised when you ask questions other than those contemplated by the original producer. Our sample comes from only one New York City program. Finally, acknowledgement pages are usually narrow in scope and identify only those who have been helpful therefore they are unlikely to reflect the totality of doctoral experience.

In discussing theoretical perspective and the bodies of literature in which to nest this quirky data we decided to consider acknowledgements in the context of ritual. Rituals are formal public statements or acts understood in a culture or community to mark a point of transformation. Dissertation acknowledgement pages meet these criteria. They bring closure to the student identity and mark the entrance to a "community of scholars." They are private sentiments made public and commonly practiced community custom. In addition to the literature on ritual, we are currently consulting mentoring, doctoral education and organizational culture in order to ground the study in eclectic, but appropriate, literature.

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in Athens Georgia, January 6-8, 2000.

With the aid of a small squadron of typists, each of the 441 acknowledgement was re-typed into Microsoft word after initial attempts at scanning pages, and making corrections, seemed relatively more time consuming. This text is currently being transferred into a case-based data system for use with HyperResearch; computer assisted qualitative analysis software.

If you are baffled by the idea of what kinds of research questions might be generated for this data and what kinds "discoveries" might come from the data I'll ask you to consider, we me, two aspects of the construction of the typical acknowledgement page. First there are at least four generic classes of key individuals, of "influentials" whom you expect to be found mentioned. They include School faculty (e.g. committee members, teachers, mentors, etc.), staff and classmates; faculty and departments outside the social work school; practitioners and agencies from the local community; and special tribute to friends and family (spouses, partners, children, parents). In addition to these generic classes there is a typical format followed in constructing tributes. For example, William Reid (1963) wrote "This writer is especially indebted to Dr. Florence Hollis, his dissertation adviser: for her thoughtful guidance throughout the various stages of this research process." In this standard construction a debt is acknowledged ("especially indebted") to a key person ("Hollis"), whose role is identified ("dissertation advisor"), a time frame is noted ("throughout the stages of research") and contribution articulated ("thoughtful guidance"). When you pause to consider these classes of "influentials" (inside the school, university, community and family) and the structural formatting of the "thanks" (e.g. individual, role, sentiment, timing) as abstract constructs they suggest a variety of questions that can be generated from this data. It is possible to consider questions of doctoral process and experience in social and cultural context. It is also possible, given the longitudinal nature of the data, to ask questions about the institution and some of its important, frequently mentioned, doctoral faculty.

One important methodological choice confronting us, (and closely related to formulating the research question) was settling on a unit of analysis. If you pick "student," you end up analyzing a series of individual cases over time. An alternative is to consider key faculty, or networks of key faculty that appear to have important longitudinal influence on the doctoral program. This approach is

particularly poignant with the Columbia data because the social work program hired its first gradate, Alfred Kahn, who has been continuously involved with the program. In addition, it hired many of its own graduates (such as Carol Meyer, Sheila Kamerman) who have spent their entire professional careers with the school and continue to be influential in the social work field.

Obviously this study is in both in development and, as noted earlier, is in transition. We have recently settled on using key influential faculty members as the unit of analysis, which means we are exploiting the longitudinal nature of the data. The study will be framed as an historical case study in doctoral education. The questions of interest in this project are concerned with the qualitative contribution and role of key faculty as individuals or in networks play in doctoral education. By examining these important figures in context we expect to see their influence, as educators and scholars, on the profession.

Today, however, I plan to present results of a preliminary study in which I used the student as the unit of analysis. In keeping with the topic of "transformation," I have selected two findings that speak to the issue. The first finds evidence of the transformation of technology and how it altered (or transformed) the doctoral community. The second is reflective and interrogates the idea, frequently noted in acknowledgement pages, that the end of doctoral existence will bring a different looking future when student becomes "Doctor."

Findings of "Transformation"

Technology

Time and technology has altered the appearance of dissertations in spite of their uniform blue bindings. Onion skin pages yellowed with age and, buckled by the impact of typewriter keystrokes, are replaced, for the moment, by pristine white bond paper fed through laser jet printers. Typing errors carefully whited-out on originals but permanently captured on carbon copies have all but vanished with the introduction of spell-check and the easy cloning of pages or entire documents with the touch of a "print" command. Dissertations no longer bear the signs of physical struggle and the final relic appears a little less sacred because of it.

Technological advances always produce a period of cultural lag. The "unsung heroes" of the dissertation process, wrote Anthony Maluccio in 1977, are "those who provided clerical and research assistance". Until relatively recently, those "unsung heroes" appeared universally on acknowledgment pages as members of an administrative and technical team of secretaries, typists, editors, computer programmers, and data technicians.

Secretaries, such as Mrs. Louise Shoemaker and Mrs. Gertrude Barth who worked with Gisella Konopka were routinely thanked for both their typing and editorial skills. Others were acknowledged for organizational skills such as the "force of typists" who "assemble[ed] the final draft" and arranged "the many details that accompany the production" for (Levy, Logan and Abramovitz). Secretaries typed drafts--and drafts--and more drafts" or "multiple drafts and final copy" for Vigilante and Wiest. And were recognized for a host of personal, interpersonal and technical skills including (patience, intelligence, cooperation, unerring performance, perseverance and ability) and, in the case of Muriel Pumphrey their ability to "decipher" hieroglyphics. Furthermore, they "check[ed] the factual data" for Robert Morris and "process[ed] questions" for Charles Levy.

In addition to this secretarial support, students shared responsibility for computer expertise, data management and analysis with a group of other technical specialists. Wittman, Lotte, Altman, Padberg and Sperr expressed "deep gratitude" for "help", "advice", "assistance" and "instruction" with "computer programming" and "in the machine records phases of data analysis. Students received help "translating raw data into machine programs" and making "computer printout runs". In the 1960s, dozens of students including Ben Orcutt and David Fanshel thanked then Professor, later President, McGill not only for his "technical help" but also for his "consultation with statistical aspects" of research".

By the 1980s, the burden for computer expertise, data management, and statistical analysis begins to shift to the doctoral student. In 1974, Ralph Dolgoff thanked those who "served as guides through the morass of knowledge required for working with computers". In 1988, Alma Norment received help in "conquer[ing] a technology" that was "new and formidable" but by 1995, Barbara

Worden expressed "a word of gratitude" to her daughters "for sharing the computer". With advancements in technology and innovations in software doctoral students, came to realize "that statistics, afterall, aren't really impossible".

Technological innovation brings costs with its benefits. One cost of the increasing power of the personal computer may be the loss of the team and the ritual of production. Manuscripts once represented the final work-product of a group of professionals but are now the sole responsibility of a student. This has at least four immediate ramifications. First, the student must develop expertise in areas previously delegated to others. Second, she or he must shoulder the burden for the entire production process. (I can only imagine the relief my predecessors must have felt when they placed their precious manuscript in the hands of a team of others to fuss with charts, graphs, footnotes, appendices, bibliographies, the niceties of proper format and assemblage). Third, there is an additional, mostly hidden financial price associated with this shift in burden, since someone--either program or student--must bear the cost of the student's learning curve to master the technology. Finally, with the diminished involvement of this supporting cast, the social and cultural nature of the doctoral experience was certainly altered.

In 1959 Wolins characterized his dissertation as a "social rather than purely individual effort". But by the 1980s references to the loneliness begin to creep onto acknowledgment pages. Students call writing a dissertation a "lonely and independent process"; "a uniquely solitary undertaking" and a "painful and always solitary process" and looked for ways to "negate feelings of isolation" according to Abramowitz, Kohn, Herman and Einbinder. I found no such references to loneliness and isolation in my early sample. Computers have made a social network that was an integral part of the doctoral community, doctoral experience and the dissertation ritual of the past all but obsolete.

Technical mastery is already a prerequisite for the academic job market. A sympathetic junior faculty recently encouraged students interviewing for faculty positions to create Power Point presentations in order to pitch our work to hiring institutions. Multi-media productions are the cutting edge for marketing both the candidate and the scholarship.

There are challenges here for the future of doctoral education. Doctoral education must include the training and support necessary to master the technical skills to compete and perform in academia. But it must also teach the skepticism necessary to be sensitive to the ways in which technology alters the way we gather, interpret, construct and peddle knowledge as well as be sensitive to how technology changes the texture and quality of our personal relationships and social communities.

Professional Life

Finally, I address an issue I stumbled on in Anthony Cupaivolo's thanks to his wife whom willingly, "ignored for so long the huge mess created by widely scattered, questionnaires, books, notes, etc". It gave me pause, not only because a student colleague had recently commented on his partner's growing frustration with "living in a file cabinet" but also because it sadly conjured up an image of my own apartment during the doctoral process.

My dissertation started, where it belonged, in alphabetical order in file folders restricted to a file cabinet; books were arranged by topic in book cases and disciplined stacks of miscellaneous papers were neatly organized on my desk. However, with the ever-increasing and unanticipated growth of dissertation by-products, my living space shrank. Huge, unstable piles of books, notes and Xeroxes began to line the bedroom wall organized by chapter. The living room window sills provided spill-over shelving for current, possibly useful future reading. My dining room table became a staging ground for organizing chapters, charts, bibliographies and appendices so I began consuming breakfast standing over the kitchen sink. The morning I woke and realized my books lined the opposite side of the bed, I knew I had crossed a mental health line.

The encroaching clutter, of course, is only the physical manifestation of the metaphoric space--emotional, intellectual, personal and social--upon which dissertations intrude. Acknowledgment pages are filled with hints of disruption. Siska, Lebowitz and Wiest recognized families for "their sacrifices", for "their understanding and forbearance", for putting up with "that strange phenomenon, a husband-father-student". Irv Piliavin offered his "deep sincere apologies" to

his sons for "acceptance of 'life without father,' Brett Seabury admits his children "waited a 'lifetime' for their daddy to finish" and Muriel Pumphrey's family, exhibited "patience with meals out of the freezer and tin cans" (Pumphrey, 1956).

Importantly, these acknowledgments are usually accompanied by a promise of a different future including "the opportunity of repaying" family with more time and availability. The underlying assumption in these promises, is that the doctoral program represents an anomalous experience.

For me, this conceptualization raises a provocative question. To what extent can the doctoral disruption be swept out the door at its conclusion, leaving life as neat--if not neater--than before? Or, to pose it differently, to what extent does the dissertation process represent the first step in the metamorphose from student to scholar? I suspect the latter. If that's the case, how does one control the threat of encroaching metaphoric clutter?

It strike me as a deceptively difficult task, in part, because the "standards"--external and internal-- that govern academic life conspire to make maintaining a healthy balance a Promethean task. I've observed the tenure process during my time as a doctoral student and feel confident that excelling in scholarship, teaching and community service isn't always enough. Since the academy seems to offer little meaningful external guidelines for success that leads to the question of individually defined standards.

Ultimately, academics are responsible for setting their own standards of excellence as well as setting their own boundaries. It is a more difficult balance in this trade than most, in part, because scholarly pursuit inevitably engages both the heart and mind making the professional often intensively personal. Intellectual pursuit will occupy just as much personal space as you let it.

All this brings me back to the doctoral education and the dissertation process. To the extent that the dissertation experience is one that begins to define the balance that will govern a student's professional afterlife it serves as an important practicum. Implications for doctoral students, faculties and programs follow. Institutional faculties provide role models, not just of scholarship but of lifestyle and culture. Faculty ought to make considered decisions about that community atmosphere when it fills and promotes through its ranks. So too must, doctoral graduates consider their own tolerance for clutter when choosing

an academic home and be forewarned against those ill-suited to their personal, professional and mental health needs. And so too, I now find, must beginning Assistant Professors facing the tenure trek consider professional clutter in personal life.

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